

## Listen, Believe, & Act:

Support for students who have been disproportionately impacted in schools



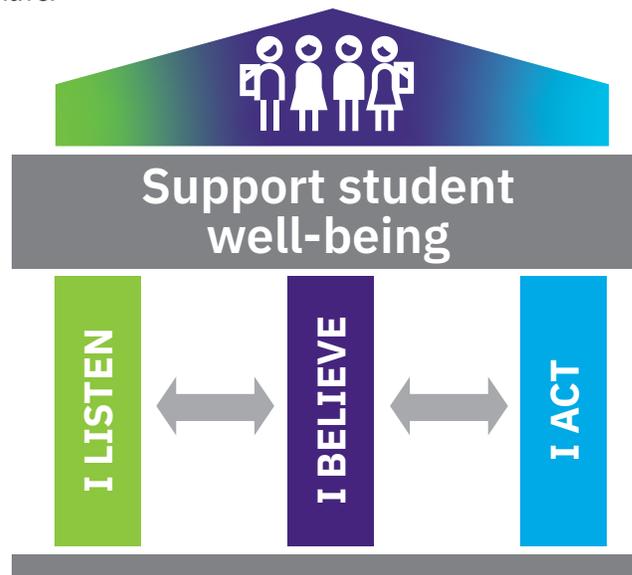
**Historically, education systems have and continue to disproportionately negatively impact and exclude Black, Indigenous, marginalized and racialized students.** Alongside these inequities, we have all been witness to terrible instances of racism, exclusion and hatred at a societal, community, and individual level. Stark truths, like the public acknowledgement and uncovering of many unmarked graves at former Canadian residential ‘schools’, and repeated acts of violence and injustice against Black people, punctuate the need for change.



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In classrooms all across the province, students and staff have been engaging in discussions about inequities, social justice, and/or about impacts felt by instances of racism marginalization and oppression. It is important to provide spaces within the classroom for discussion and support (class-wide, small group, or individually). It can be helpful to think in advance about how best to prepare for these conversations, so that students are heard, validated, and are left with a sense of hope for the future. Important considerations include:

- \* Educating yourself about the history and the current impact of colonialism, Black enslavement, white supremacy, and other legacies that continue to disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized students in our schools.
- \* Continuously reflecting on your personal biases, social locations or identities that may impact your opinions and interactions with students.
- \* Taking the time to reflect on the diversity of experiences felt by every student.
- \* Recognizing that not all students will be psychologically ready or willing to discuss what has happened around them and to them, especially soon after specific events or instances. It is important to meet the students where they are, rather than thinking that you know what is best for the students.
- \* Plan to check in with individual students [before or after a class discussion](#) to ensure that they are prepared for the conversation and are feeling well after it. Actively incorporate daily check-ins with students on how they are doing, not only when certain situations arise.
- \* Attend to your own well-being and take time to think about and validate the stress you carry as well, so you set this aside while you consider the unique needs that each of the students have.



To further support the adoption of anti-oppressive, anti-racist, and student-centered practice, it is necessary that we begin to think and act differently in response to concerns that arise at school, particularly those that involve students who have been deeply impacted by systemic, social and individual oppression, racism and associated inequities, and/or instances of racism, marginalization and oppression. Whether facilitating a discussion or responding to a situation that perpetuates racism or marginalization, it can be helpful to remember to **Listen, Believe, & Act**. As shown, this is meant to be an iterative process, where upholding the three pillars of listening, believing, and acting allows students to feel welcomed, supported, and validated within their school community.



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## I LISTEN



**Listening to understand is a key part of supporting student mental health and well-being in the classroom.**

- \* Focus on being an active listener to foster a welcoming environment:
  - Listen to understand, not to respond.
  - Be conscious of your body language. Demonstrate empathy and compassion when students share their experiences.
  - Be physically, emotionally and mentally present. Limit multi-tasking. In this way you are communicating to students that they matter and that you care about them.
  - Use phrases that validate each student's perspective, encourage open communication, and show that you are listening non-judgmentally (e.g., "I can understand why you would feel that way because...").
  - Listen for quiet voices but do not press for engagement in dialogue (in group discussion).
  - Allow for time and space, do not rush conversations.
- \* Provide many opportunities to share; as a class, in small groups, and individually.
- \* Be cognizant of your positionality, power, and privilege (e.g., race, gender identity, settler status, socio-economic status, etc.).
- \* Consciously be aware of your preconceived notions and biases, and how they influence how you are listening.
- \* Absorb what students are saying, which can go beyond their words. Notice their body language and nonverbal expression as well, to better understand them.

## I BELIEVE



**Believing what students share validates their lived experiences.**

- \* Believe what students are telling you about their experiences and respond with compassion.
- \* Be careful not to inadvertently negate or diminish their experiences or emotions by what you say, or do not say, in response to their words. Pause and check.
  - Understand → confirm with the student that you have understood their message by restating what they have said.
  - Validate → let students know that their experiences are valid and that it is okay to feel however they are feeling.
- \* Acknowledge student statements using neutral language like "I hear you" and avoid using vague reassurances like, "It's going to be ok".
- \* Self-reflect on the discomfort you may feel by hearing and absorbing student messages, without immediately jumping to finding solutions.
- \* Educate yourself about how disparities in access to healthcare, education, housing, employment, etc., disproportionately affect students who are Black, Indigenous, racialized or marginalized.



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## I ACT



**Acting with and for students is integral in reassuring students that their identities, mental health, and well-being are affirmed, valued and supported.**

Students whose intersecting identities are connected to the topic at hand, may need additional care and support during discussions. Without making any assumptions, check in informally as part of regular classroom life to show that you care.

- \* Watch for signs that students may be struggling with their mental health (see [ONECALL Desk Reference](#) and [Supporting Minds Strategies](#)), and, if needed, support them and their families to connect with mental health and well-being supports within your school community (e.g., school social worker, psychologist, child and youth worker, etc.)
- \* Ensure that students' wishes are respected and that they guide the plan of action that they believe is best for them. (*\*Note that if students disclose that they or someone else is in imminent risk of harm, then it is important to draw on your board's crisis response/ suicide intervention protocols.*)
- \* Act with and for students to support in naming and dismantling oppressive policies and practices, such as removing barriers to accessing support.
- \* Consult with and engage community agencies and other culturally relevant supports when needed.
- \* When acting, think about what you need to do to bring about change. Consult with your colleagues to have multiple perspectives involved in the decision-making process and consider what voices are not at the table and actively seek their input.
- \* Focus on continuous learning and education:
  - Continue having conversations about racial justice, mental health, well-being, and reflect on the role you have to play in actioning needed changes in support of students who hold marginalized and oppressed identities.
  - Keep yourself educated on the injustices that continue to happen to Black, Indigenous, racialized, and marginalized communities in Canada, and around the world.
- \* While action helps create strong relationships and systemic change, sometimes there isn't anything 'wrong', and students just need someone to listen, and reassure them.

### Looking for more ways to support Black Students?

[How to Foster and Maintain Supportive Spaces for Black Youth Tip Sheet](#)  
[Self-Love Practices for Black Youth Social Media Shareables](#)





## CASE STUDY #1

Aaya is a new teacher at a large secondary school in a neighborhood that has a mix of affluent and lower socioeconomic status families. They will be having one student, Alexis, coming to their class this year who has formerly attended the First Nations school in the community. Aaya knows that the community has had intermittent wifi access and that students coming from reserve are often anxious to start school in the public system at the best of times. This year, they wonder how Alexis will be feeling given the continued discoveries of unmarked residential school graves, and what they could do to support Alexis to feel welcome when arriving to school.

***How can Aaya use the 'Listen, Believe & Act' framework to support Alexis in her transition to the new school community and school system?***



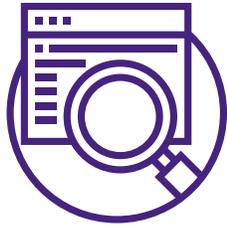
## CASE STUDY #2

Thanh is a grade six teacher at a school within a small city that is predominantly made up of White students and staff. There are several newcomer and multilingual families who have recently moved into the neighborhood. Thanh noticed that the newcomer students and their families have had many struggles trying to become a part of the school community.

One day at lunch, one of Thanh's students comes to tell her that while collecting recycling with the caretaker she overheard two teachers talking in the staff room, discussing Isaac, a ten-year-old classmate who recently immigrated from an African country. They were making comments about Isaac's inability to stay awake in class. The teachers also questioned the parenting capabilities of Isaac's parents. Thanh happens to know that the family has been dealing with a lot lately and it has impacted Isaac's family significantly: his father was hospitalized for several weeks, and his mother had to work two jobs to provide for Isaac and his two younger siblings during this time. As Isaac is the oldest, the responsibility to look after his siblings often falls on him.

***Without breaking confidentiality, how can Thanh use the 'Listen, Believe & Act' framework to connect with the student who overheard this conversation, to support Isaac, and enlighten her colleagues?***





## REFERENCES/RESOURCES

'Listen, Believe, Act Framework' adapted with permission from Patricia Marra-Stapleton, Mental Health Lead, YRDSB; Ontario, Canada (2020).

"Addressing Systemic Racism: Creating Safe and Equitable Schools"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_nvWvIVgsJs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nvWvIVgsJs)

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Intercultural Development Research Association. (2021). Understanding and Addressing Racial Trauma and Supporting Black Students in Schools. [https://www.idra.org/education\\_policy/understanding-and-addressing-racial-trauma-and-supporting-black-students-in-schools-policy-brief/](https://www.idra.org/education_policy/understanding-and-addressing-racial-trauma-and-supporting-black-students-in-schools-policy-brief/)

Sue, D.W., Alsaidi, S., Awad, M.N., Glaeser, E., Calle, C.Z. & Mendez, M. (2019). Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets, White allies, and bystanders. *American Psychologist*, 74(1), 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000296>

"Supporting Students Impacted by Racial Stress and Trauma"  
[https://youtu.be/jNX2WJo\\_XX0](https://youtu.be/jNX2WJo_XX0)

Tatum, B. D. (2017). "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race.

Talaga, T. (2017). *Seven fallen feathers: racism, death, and hard truths in a northern city*. Anansi.

The Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations About Race:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=woEh1bIQFKs>

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